

The God Who Provides (Part 4 of 6)

Bitter to Sweet, Hungry to Filled: Learning to Trust God Every Day

Exodus 15:22-16:36

Mark Vroegop

"Then Moses made Israel set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; therefore it was named Marah. And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" And he cried to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. There the LORD made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them, saying, "If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer." Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, and they encamped there by the water. They set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the people of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily." So Moses and Aaron said to all the people of Israel, "At evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your grumbling against the LORD. For what are we, that you grumble against us?" And Moses said, "When the LORD gives you in the evening meat to eat and in the morning bread to the full, because the LORD has heard your grumbling that you grumble against him—what are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against the LORD."'" (Exodus 15:22–16:8, ESV)

As we began our study of Exodus, I identified for you that this book lays the foundation for many concepts and ideas which take on a fuller meaning in the New Testament or which would be familiar to most people in our contemporary culture. A few notable examples would be the following: the sacrificial lamb, atonement, "I AM," Exodus, wilderness wandering, and the crossing of the Red Sea. Each of these ideas has their roots in book of Exodus.

Let me give you another one which I'm sure is familiar to you. It is from the Lord's Prayer: "Give us this day our daily bread." You've probably prayed that as a part of the Lord's Prayer a number of times or at least you are familiar with the concept. But do you know what that part of the Lord's Prayer really means? And, more practically, do you know how to live in light of "daily bread?"

The concept of God giving His people “daily bread” has its roots in the Exodus narrative. We discover that after establishing that God’s people belong to Him (Exodus 13), after leading them through the Red Sea and destroying Pharaoh’s army (Exodus 14), after celebrating the warrior-God in the Song of Moses (Exodus 15), the people face another challenge. It is one that I’m sure you have faced a few times in your lifetime.

Here’s the challenge: “Can you trust God, not just in the big things, but also every single day?” Or let me state it differently with more of a focus away from ourselves: “Is God worthy to be trusted beyond the crisis moments? Is God powerful and personal?” This is the issue Israel will face, and God will use their most basic human needs to teach them this lesson. God will use thirst and hunger to show them a very important truth: **God can be trusted every day.**

The God who delivers is the God who provides – every single day. And there are very significant implications of this for how the people of God approach their daily lives, their fears, and their work. So let’s look at two stories of God’s provision while keeping in mind that these stories are loaded with important lessons about God and His relationship with His people.

The Problem of Grumbling

Exodus 15 introduces us to a repeated struggle for the Israelites. In 15:24 we have the first use of the word “grumble” in the book of Exodus, and it will appear more in the next two chapters than in the rest of the book – used eight times in chapter 16 alone! This repeated use is not by accident. The people will wrestle deeply with this common human weakness.

The issue of grumbling surfaced only three days after the powerful deliverance that Israel experienced through the Red Sea crossing. Verses 22-23 set the context for us:

“Then Moses made Israel set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; therefore it was named Marah” (Exodus 15:22–23).

Their first few days in the wilderness proved to be very challenging. Their most basic need was water, and they were not able to find any. You can imagine how difficult this must have been and how frightening. They were in a completely unknown area, and finding water was not easy. Moses, because of his former life as a shepherd, may have been familiar with this area, and perhaps he led them to Marah thinking that it would be a good place to find water.

You can imagine the scene of the people seeing water in the distance and rushing to it. I would guess that they were cheering and excited. But when they began to drink the water, they were disgusted. Verse 23 says they could not drink the water because it was “bitter.” The water likely was filled with minerals or salt such that it was not drinkable. It is not hard to picture this scene as the people’s joy turns to frustration and fear as they spit out the water and turn on Moses.

Verse 24 says *“And the people grumbled against Moses saying, “What shall we drink?”* Now there are a few things that you need to know about this word “grumble.”

- When the word is used in Exodus or Numbers it is always connected to the word “against.” So the act of grumbling is directed toward someone.
- It is the external expression of internal rebellion. The word is closely connected to the actions of a rebel. You could think of grumbling as verbal rebellion. It expresses verbally what may not be fully embraced physically. But it is a form of rebellion.
- Grumbling typically surfaces due to hard circumstances that are given too much power, control, or fear. It is a sinful response to hardship.
- Grumbling ultimately is an issue between human beings and God. Even if water is the issue or Moses is the leader, ultimately the grumbling is directed toward God.

If we look ahead to the issue of bread in chapter 16 we see this very clearly:

“...and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your grumbling against the LORD. For what are we, that you grumble against us?” And Moses said, “When the LORD gives you in the evening meat to eat and in the morning bread to the full, because the LORD has heard your grumbling that you grumble against him—what are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against the LORD” (Exodus 16:7–8, ESV)

So although Moses and Aaron were the focal points of the people’s frustration, their real problem was with God. The issue here is the fact that the people refused to see their difficulties through the lens of the God who had powerfully delivered them from Egypt and who had recently demonstrated His ability to rescue them. How quickly their faith (and ours!) wanes! Grumbling gives in to the fear that God isn’t interested in our daily needs or that He only takes care of the “big things.” Grumbling is a lack of faith. It is a subtle and internal form of rebellion.

The issue of bitter water was solved by the Lord providing a log that turned the water sweet (vv 25), and then the Lord laid down an important lesson that He wanted them to learn:

“If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer.” (Exodus 15:26)

The promise here is connected to their grumbling. The promise was not that they would never get sick or that they would never have difficulties. Rather, it was a promise that God would not treat His people like He had treated the Egyptians. It was a promise that God was not “against” His people like He was against Egypt. The promise here was (and is!) that God’s heart could be trusted even when things are difficult and challenging. And that why the text ends in verse 27 with the arrival in an area called Elim which boasted of twelve springs and seventy palm trees.

God brought His people through their first wilderness failure. And that raises another issue.

The Hope in Divine Testing

Something else that emerges from this text is the simple fact that the people of Israel are not on a blind mission, wandering around the wilderness. God has a plan for them, and He intends for them to learn some important lessons about what it means to really trust Him. God has delivered them from the slavery in Egypt, and He will lead them to Mt. Sinai to receive His Law. But there are things that, for their own good, they must learn. Therefore, God tests them.

The issue of God's testing moves from a one-time event – as in the case with the bitter water – to a daily test. And this test is directly connected to something called "manna." Chapter 16 records the next moment of grumbling and testing. Now the issue is not water; it is food.

Once again the people of Israel fall prey to the problem of grumbling as their needs in the wilderness surface another instance of internal rebellion. After turning on Moses and Aaron, the people say absolutely outrageous, even blasphemous, things:

"Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." (Exodus 16:3, ESV)

The next few verses help us to understand God's aim in all of this. God has purposes beyond what Israel was seeing, and it is very clear that God wanted to teach His people an important lesson. Verses 4-5 give us a great summary:

"Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily.'" (Exodus 16:4–5, ESV)

Everything about the provision of "raining bread" was designed to help the people learn to trust in God. We will look at that more in a moment. But I just want to add this category in your soul – one that may be new for some of you. It is the category of divine testing.

Now when you hear the word "test," I would expect that many of you have a negative reaction. After all, who likes to be "tested"? Part of the problem is that the word is often too closely connected to the idea of "temptation." But the idea is not a test to push a person to failure; rather, the idea is for the experiences of life to prove or validate God's worthiness to be trusted. So the concept is a test which is given in order to validate what you already believe (or say you believe) to be true. God's purpose in the testing is to help the Israelites, not to trick them. His aim is hopeful, not harmful.

The apostle Paul picks up on this in 1 Corinthians 10 when he talks about the stories in the Old Testament and how New Testament readers should use them:

“Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.” We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. (1 Corinthians 10:6-11, ESV)

So their testing was for their benefit and for ours! We are to read about their testing and learn. And then Paul makes it personal and gives us a promise:

Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. (1 Corinthians 10:12–13, ESV)

The word “temptation” can also mean “trial” or “test”. The idea here is not that God is actively tempting His people – that is what Satan does and God cannot (see James 1:13). But it does mean that in the spirit of loving instruction or discipline (see Heb. 12:3-11), God designs and permits circumstances that provide an opportunity for the validation of our faith and God’s power. And rather than grumbling about those moments, we should embrace them and view them through the faith-filled hope that God has my best in mind. There are things that God wants us to learn about Himself, and you cannot learn these things theoretically. It has to be tested.

You see, there are things God wanted Israel to learn, and the only way they would really learn them was by practice. Charles Spurgeon called the wilderness a University for Israel: *“{The wilderness was} the Oxford and Cambridge for God’s students. There they went to the University, and he taught and trained them, and they took their degree before they entered into the promised land.”¹* They needed to test what they really believed about God. Sometimes those tests would be significant and risky. But there were other tests they needed to embrace each and every day. And the collection of manna was a part of that daily test.

The Daily Test of Manna

Exodus 16 records the miraculous provision of food for the people of Israel while they are in the wilderness. But with a closer examination, it is evident there is much more to this provision than just meeting the people’s physical needs. “Manna from Heaven” will become an important lesson for God’s people about learning to trust God every single day.

There are a number of things which are important to note here regarding the provision of manna.

¹ Ryken, P. G., & Hughes, R. K. (2005). *Exodus: Saved for God's glory* (419). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

1. The context for this lesson was “a need”

Once again we hear the grumbling and complaining spirit of God’s people. Immediately following the provision of water at Marah and the rest at Elim, they set out in the wilderness only to be in a similar position as they were at Marah. However, this time we get a fuller sense of what is going on in their hearts. They are hungry, they are scared, and they start to rebel against Moses and even God:

“And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them, “Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”” (Exodus 16:2–3, ESV)

You can hear how loaded all of this is. The immediate need and the resulting fear caused the people to start down a dangerous path.

2. God used a “need” to teach a greater lesson about daily provision

God’s response was to announce to Moses that He was going to use this situation as an opportunity to test the Israelites. The wording of what God said was very important:

“Then the LORD said to Moses, “Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily.”” (Exodus 16:4–5, ESV)

Did you hear how often the idea of “daily” was highlighted in what God said? Did you notice the connection between gathering a day’s portion and testing whether they will walk in His law? These issues are linked. In other words, manna is not just for food; it is for learning to trust in God. God will use their hunger for food to show them how to be satisfied in God.

3. The provision of food was connected to the glory of God

It should be noted that as Moses and Aaron announced that God heard their grumbling and that He was going to provide, the glory of God was manifested in the cloud (see 16:10). It seems clear that God wanted to provide a link between himself, His glory, and what the Israelites will see on the ground in the morning. The provision of meat in the evening and bread in the morning was to be a reminder that *“it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt”* (16:6-7). In other words, the daily provision of food was just as connected to the glory of God as the destruction of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea. God is not just interested in delivering His people from slavery; He intends to care for their daily needs. The glory of God is seen in both. And Israel needs to learn to trust Him in both.

4. The provision was sufficient for each day

Verses 13-21 provide very clear instructions as to how the food was to be collected. Every day enough food was to be gathered for every person in the household – *“whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack. Each of them gathered as much as he could eat”* (Ex. 16:18). What’s more, they were told that there were to be no “left-overs” (Ex. 16:19). In fact, those who violated this instruction discovered that the manna turned “wormy” the next day (Ex. 16:20).

Verse 21 is a summary statement: *“Morning by morning they gathered it, each as much as he could eat; but when the sun grew hot, it melted”* (Ex. 16:21). Manna was not just about food. The manner in which it was provided and what happened to it over time forced Israel into an important pattern of going to bed at night believing that tomorrow there would be manna on the ground. This is literal daily bread. It was sufficient. There was always enough. But they had to trust God every day to meet their needs. And in that provision, the people were learning important lessons about their God.

5. Sabbath rest was a part of the provision rhythm

Exodus 16:23 is the first use of the word Sabbath in the Old Testament, and it is directly tied to this manna-provision lesson. Moses gave the people very clear instructions:

“This is what the LORD has commanded: ‘Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD; bake what you will bake and boil what you will boil, and all that is left over lay aside to be kept till the morning.’” So they laid it aside till the morning, as Moses commanded them, and it did not stink, and there were no worms in it. Moses said, “Eat it today, for today is a Sabbath to the LORD; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, which is a Sabbath, there will be none.”” (Exodus 16:23–26, ESV)

This really is remarkable! Six days a week there was manna every day, and if an Israelite gathered extra, it rotted. But on the sixth day, the people were to gather enough for the sixth and the seventh day, and it was persevered. Six days a week they had to believe God would provide, and one day a week they gathered more, believing that God would again be true to His word.

Therefore every week Israel had to live by faith. They had to believe that 1) God would provide for their needs, 2) obeying God’s instructions was necessary for living, and 3) intentional rest was not a waste. Every week Israel, through the provision and collection of manna, was learning about their dependency on God.

Now we will look more at the Sabbath concept when we come to the Ten Commandments, but I simply want to highlight here that God intentionally made the Sabbath a part of their life. Why? Sabbath is a reminder that life is not about collecting, baking, and storing manna. Instead manna was supposed to be something that pointed God’s people back to Himself. God’s economy of provision was designed to meet His people’s needs while reminding them about their ultimate

need of Him. Manna and Sabbath sent a message: **God is able to meet your needs.** Or to put it another way: "Man does not live for bread alone."

"And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." (Deuteronomy 8:3, ESV)

The testing, the hunger, the manna, and the Sabbath were all designed to demonstrate that more than anything, the people needed God. He was able to meet their needs.

Grace for Today

So how does the provision of manna connect with us in our contemporary setting? This text is the Bible, and it is a part of the story of Israel for a reason. There are things God wants to teach us about Himself as we read this section of Scripture. Let me give you a few things to think about:

- 1. The ultimate need in the human heart is to know God.** Manna or money feel pressing and urgent, but neither food nor finances can really satisfy. Provisions are meant to point us Godward. It is no wonder that Jesus Christ called Himself the bread of life, said that He came down from heaven to give life to the world (John 6:33). And it is only through Jesus that we can experience real satisfaction of our hunger and thirst (John 6:35).
- 2. God is still the provider of everything whether it is manna, money, or grace.** When the apostle Paul talked about the joy of generosity and the risk connected to giving he said this:

"And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work." (2 Corinthians 9:8, ESV)
- 3. Sabbath and generosity are vital expressions of a person's faith in God.** The challenge for Israel is our challenge too. Do you believe that God will provide for you? Do you believe that He cares for you? Do you believe that the God who delivers is the God who will provide? If so, then intentional, worshipful rest combined with intentional giving are how we affirm that truth. By resting and giving we say, "God, I know that working all the time and hoarding my money will never give me the security that come from knowing you. Therefore, I choose to rest and I choose to give."

Manna was the starting point of the lesson that human beings should never make the daily pursuit of their needs the single passion of their life. Manna was given to feed their stomachs and their souls. Manna reminds us that God can be trusted every single day. *"The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him.""* (Lam. 3:22–24, ESV)

© College Park Church

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. www.yourchurch.com